
THE SIKH WORLD

Singing The Scriptures

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Contributors</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xxviii</i>
Introduction	1
PART I	
History, Institutions, and Practices	9
1 The Sikh Gurus: Unity and Continuity of the Office of Authority	11
2 Guru, <i>Śabad</i> , and Khalsa: Exploring Conceptual Intersections	25
3 The <i>Guru Granth Sahib</i>	37
4 The <i>Dasam Granth</i>	50
5 Encountering Oneness and Exiled Being: Conceptualizing Udāsī in the Janamsākhīs, Vārān Bhāī Gurdās, and Sīr Gurū Granth Sāhib	61
6 Persian Sikh Literature	73
7 Codes of Conduct and Way of Life	83
8 The Gurdwara	94
9 The <i>Nagar Kirtan</i>	103

Contents

PART II	113
Global Sikh Communities	
10 Sikhs in India	115
11 Sikhs in Australia and New Zealand	125
12 Sikh Life in Canada	136
13 Sikhs in/of Africa: Imperial, Postcolonial, and Transnational Articulations	148
14 Sikhs in Mainland Europe	160
15 Sikhs in Britain: A Community in Transition	171
16 Sikhs in the USA	180
 PART III	 197
Ethical Issues	
17 Gender and <i>Sikhi</i>	199
18 Death and Dying: Within the <i>Guru Granth Sahib</i>	212
19 Ecotheology	223
 PART IV	 235
Activism	
20 Anticolonial Resistance in the Early Twentieth Century: Babbar Aklis and Kirti-Kisan Party	237
21 Akal Takht and Sikh Activism	248
22 Transnational Sikh Social Activism: Colonial, National, and Sovereign Encounters	260
 PART V	 275
Modern Literature and Exegesis	
23 Sikh Interpretive Traditions	277

24	The Possibility of the Secular: Sikh Engagements With Modern Punjabi Literature	287
25	Words Across Borders: Literature of the Sikh Diaspora	300
PART VI		
	Music, Art, and Architecture	311
26	Singing the Scripture: Sikh Kīrtan in Literature, Practices, and Musicological Studies	313
27	The Five Essentials of Sikh Art	328
28	Contours of <i>Kalakari</i> : Contemporary Sikh Art and Artists in the Global Sikh Diaspora	343
29	Conservation Philosophy for Punjab	359
30	Sikh Architecture	369
PART VII		
	Citizenship, Sovereignty, and the Nation-State	383
31	Sociopolitical Aspects of Sikh Philosophy	385
32	Sikh Sovereignty and Modern Government	400
33	Sikhs and Multiculturalism	411
34	Sikh Nationalism	421
PART VIII		
	Diversity and Its Challenges	429
35	Diverse Groups Within the Sikh Panth	431
36	Caste Groups: The Lived Experience of <i>Zat</i> (Caste) Amongst Sikhs	440
37	Racism or Mistaken Identity?: Anti-Sikh Hate Crimes and the Need for Better Recording and Monitoring	450
38	Atheism, Agnosticism, and Irreligiosity	463

Contents

PART IX	473
Media	
39 Sikhs and Cinema	475
40 Sikh Television Channels	489
41 The Sikh Internet	504
42 Sikhs in Social Media	513
 PART X	 525
Education	
43 Sikh Schools and Academies in England	527
44 Sikh Educational Institutions in India	542
45 Modern Sikh Studies: Bridging Differences, Opening New Horizons	551
 <i>Index</i>	 572

SINGING THE SCRIPTURE

Sikh Kīrtan in Literature, Practices, and Musicological Studies

Francesca Cassio

Introduction

The singing of devotional hymns, known as *śabad* or *Gurbānī kīrtan*, is one of the foundational practices established by the first Sikh Gurū, Nānak (1469–1539). Accompanied on the *rabāb* (a fretless lute) played by the Muslim musician Bhāī Mardānā, the founder of the Sikh faith left his message in songs set to melodic frameworks called *rāgas*. To Gurū Nānak, who defined himself as the *dhādhi* (bard) of the *Akal Purakh* (Timeless Creator), are attributed 974 *śabads* (lyrical hymns) in 19 *rāgas* and 26 melodic variants. These constitute the ground of a poetical and musical repertory that flourished during the time of the following nine Sikh gurūs, between the late fifteenth century and the early eighteenth century. Incorporating a preexisting tradition of devotional poetry passed on through songs, over the first decades of Sikh history, the musical settings of the lyrical hymns also worked as aural–oral modes to memorize and impart the Sikh Gurūs' teachings. Remembered by the Sikh *Panth* (community), this knowledge was initially transmitted and embodied by way of listening, reciting, and singing, which originated an oral tradition still prevalent among Sikhs even today (Singh 2000). Recent scholarship, however, indicates Gurū Nānak's urgency in preserving his *śabads* in a written form. The hypothesis that early forms of Sikh scripture trace back to Gurū Nānak is corroborated by the analysis of some compositions attributed to him, as well as by studies of manuscripts that predate the formation of the Sikh canonical scripture (Mann 2001; Singh 2000). It was with the second Gurū (1504–1552) – whose spiritual name of Angad (lit. *limb*) was meant to mark a continuity with Gurū Nānak's legacy – that a distinctive script called *gurumukhī* (lit. "the Gurūs' mouth") was developed and eventually utilized for notating the text of the *śabads* as an aid to memorization. Based on this direct line of aural and written sources, the earliest manuscripts (available to scholars) trace back to the 1570s, the time of the third Sikh Guru, Amar Dās (1479–1574). Known as the *Goindval pothīs*, these volumes encompass Gurū Nānak's verses, along with 62 *ślokas* (invocations) by the second Gurū, 907 hymns by Gurū Amar Dās, and a selection of *rāga*-based songs attributed to Bhakti and Sufi poet-saints of the medieval era. Notably, like the coeval anthologies of devotional songs, these early manuscripts were compiled according to the *rāga-rāgini* system that was used to classify melodic types. This musical criterion seems to indicate the consistent role of singing in the context of worship. By the early seventeenth century, the number of musical and poetical compositions had increased to more than 5,000, with the contributions of the fourth Gurū

Rām Dās (1534–1581) – who added another 11 rāgas and 679 compositions – and the considerable input of the fifth Gurū, Arjan (1563–1606), to whom are attributed 2,218 hymns. In 1604, Gurū Arjan collected this vast body of liturgical poems in the first canonical version of the Sikh scripture, also known as *Ādī Granth* (lit. “first book”). Written in *gurumukhī*, the text is articulated in more than 20 vernacular languages, to signify the pluriversal nature of the divine Word that “speaks” to all. There is enough evidence that – based on previous manuscripts – Gurū Arjan shaped the Sikh Scripture in a distinct way not only by including, and in some cases re-classifying, the śabads of the first five Gurūs according to specific rāgas, but also by editing the selections of Bhakti and Sufi songs, for the sake of theological and musical consistency (Singh 2000).

In its modern printed form, the Sikh Scripture has reached a standard format of 1,430 pages, divided into three main sections. The first is a short segment (pages 1–13) that includes the prayers for early morning (*Japjī*) and hymns for the evening (*Rahrās*) and night (*Sohilā*) liturgy. The last part of the *Granth*, from pages 1353 to 1430, is a miscellaneous section of short verses by the Sikh Gurūs and poet-saints, including hymns in praise of the Sikh Gurūs composed by the *bhatts* (court poets). The main corpus of the scripture, spanning pages 14 to 1353, is constituted by a vast body of songs arranged by musical and poetical criteria. But unlike the early Sikh manuscripts, this central section is indexed according to 30 main rāgas that do not follow the *rāga-rāgini* classification. Within each musical segment, named after a rāga, the hymns are archived by their authors and by poetic forms, from shortest to longest. The same schema was preserved in the later version of the volume, the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* (henceforth GGS), recompiled by the last Gurū, Gobind Singh (1666–1708). In this *Granth*, the tenth gurū added 116 hymns and a new rāga (*Jajjantī*) credited to his father, the ninth Gurū, Teg Bahadur (1621–1675). Before his death, Gurū Gobind Singh attributed sovereign authority to the GGS and to the Word (*Bāṇī*) as the sole living, eternal Gurū of the baptized Sikhs.

“The Word, the Bāṇī is Gurū, and Gurū is the Bāṇī. Within the Bāṇī ambrosial nectar is contained,” recites a well-known verse of Gurū Rām Dās (GGS: 982). The *Word-as-Gurū* not only is one of the most important conceptual continuities from Gurū Nānak to Gurū Gobind Singh, that gives “Sikh thought” a certain uniqueness (Mandair 2009), but it must be the focal point of attention of the devotees’ mind.

To indicate the primary importance of the Word over the musical rendition, Sikh scholars and practitioners unanimously designate Sikh kīrtan as *śabad pradhān* (“text-driven”). In this epistemological context, the musical setting is intended as subservient to the Word–Gurū, and therefore, this genre of singing is known as *śabad kīrtan* or *Gurbāṇī kīrtan*. The *śabad/Gurbāṇī kīrtan* practice is held among (and by) the community members, as part of the liturgical function, along with the reading (*pāth*), the explanation (*kathā*) of the Bāṇī, and prayers (*ardās*). Kīrtan is generally (but not exclusively) performed in the Sikh temple, the *gurdwārā*, where singers sit on a side facing the Scripture and the sangat (Figure 1), to offer their selfless service (*sewā*). There are various types of kīrtan settings, from the plain congregational singing, to the “solo” performance of temple musicians (the *rāgīs* and – formerly – the *rabābīs*) specialized in the liturgical singing of the śabads according to the rāgas and poetical-musical forms indicated in the GGS.

In the “*purāṇan*” (centuries-old) tradition, kīrtan was taught as based on four “pillars,” namely, *rāga* (melodic framework), *tāla* (rhythmic cycle), *śabad* (Word), and *surti* (intentness). Although the Word is the most important among these, *purāṇan Gurbāṇī kīrtan* is a combination of all four of these aspects. As the thirteenth-generation Gurbāṇī kīrtan exponent Bhāi Baldeep Singh maintains. “*Gurbāṇī, or the śabada is the Gurū, but neither rāga, tāla, nor surti are accorded the same status, even though without them, Gurbāṇī Kīrtana cannot exist*” (2019: 24). Of these four pillars, nowadays the *rāga* is arguably the most neglected and least known.

The impact of colonial modernity has dramatically affected the aural heritage of Gurbānī kīrtan, and over the past century, the rāga setting has become less relevant for the singing of the scriptural hymns. The rāga-based śābads that were once a profound means for conveying *gyan* (gnosis) among the early Sikh *Panth* are now deemed an elitist tradition, rendered only by few experts. In the scripture, in fact, only the names of the rāgas are mentioned, with no indication of their melodic outlines, which until the early twentieth century had been passed on orally. Preserved in archival recordings and in rare books with notation, the *purātan śabad rīts* (rāga-based heritage songs) are the tip of the iceberg of an entire cultural ecosystem that is now disappearing.

The musical settings of the scriptural hymns today range from spontaneous congregational singing, to newly composed songs according to twentieth century “classical” (*khyāl*) music, and studio-produced recordings following the music industry’s canons. Both this historical depth and perpetual change are *twin-phenomena* (Manuel 2015) common in other South Asian traditions, although have never been examined – until recently – in relation to Sikh music culture. Whereas there is an increasing interest around modern kīrtan forms, the study of the Sikh musical heritage has been absent from (ethno)musicological scholarship. Only in the early twenty-first century was Sikh musicology introduced in Indian and Western universities for the study of the musical knowledges – intangible and tangible assets – to perform śābad kīrtan.

Kīrtan in (ethno)Musicological Literature

Kīrtan is an umbrella term that designates the singing of devotional poetry, performed in contexts deemed heterodox according to modern Brahmanical-Hindu culture. Derived from the Sanskrit root *kīrt* (to “glorify”), kīrtan is often translated into English as “eulogy,” or more commonly as “praise song,” for the congregational worship of Hindu deities. The term appears in Hindu epic literature but is not found in early sources of Indian music history. As a music practice, kīrtan acquired popularity in the medieval *bhakti* (devotional) literature across South Asia, from Bengal to the Punjab, with some common musical traits as well as significant epistemic differences. To this day, however, the genre is still viewed as an heterogeneous category of devotional musics, generally afferent to Hindu ideologies about sacred sound (Beck 2019; Slawek 1988). While the term *kīrtan* is recurrent in the GGS, as associated with the singing of rāga-based songs, the Gurbānī heritage is yet a neglected area of study by ethnomusicology and deemed a peripheral variant of a “greater” Brahmanical-Hindu tradition.

This conceptual framework is rooted in Orientalist (ethno)musicological scholarship, according to which South Asian musics were classified according into *Great Traditions* and *Little Traditions* (Powers 1980).

The category of *Great Traditions* includes pan-regional genres, “classical” art-forms founded upon explicit theoretical principals, verbalized in written literature, based on the rāga system, patronized and performed by professional musicians. At the opposite end, the *Little Traditions* encompass “folk” and local text-driven songs, set on implicit theoretical principles, not rāga-based, performed by nonprofessional musicians. The finding of rāga-based kīrtan traditions (such as those preserved in Vaiṣṇava and Gurbānī heritages), pushed ethnomusicologists to rediscuss this binary classification, investigating the complex dynamics within, and among, traditions. More recently, while addressing the implications of mapping musics according to hegemonic “classical” art-forms and subaltern “folk” expressions, contemporary scholarship is questioning the notion of rāgas’ knowledge as an exclusive privilege of elite milieus. In this context, the case study of Gurbānī kīrtan plays today a significant role in revealing far-reaching implications that challenge the dominant historical narrative of South Asian music established in the colonial and modern era. Through a decolonizing

approach – which implies the recognition and undoing of colonially derived hierarchical structures (Mignolo and Walsh 2018) – the following sections debate Gurbānī kīrtan in the context of pre-modern musical literatures, where it originated.

The Pada-Rāga Unit – Kīrtan in Pre-Modern Traditions

Gurbānī sangīt (lit. “music”) is an expression that encompasses all the musical knowledges to perform śabad kīrtan. Its heritage represents one of the few traditions that have preserved a rāga-based body of devotional songs, from the pre-modern era to this day. In order to seize the historical depth of this repertory, Gurbānī sangīt will be discussed here in the context of coeval devotional musics of the Vaiṣṇava congregations in the Vraj region (in modern Uttar Pradesh). From a musicological perspective, all these traditions practiced “text-driven” kīrtans, based on devotional *padas* (poems), set to rāgas and “big” *tālas* (long slow-paced rhythmic cycles).

Meaning *verse*, and more broadly “poetic composition written according to metrical rules” (Kāhn Singh Nābhā 1930), *pada* is a term recurrent in the medieval literature as well as in the headings of the Sikh scriptural hymns. Intended as *poem for singing* (Sanyal and Widdess 2004), in early music literature, *pada* is one of the six constituents of the *prabhandā*, an “archetypal song of praise offered to a deity or to a royal patron” (Rowell 1992: 274). In the GGS, *pade* (plural of *pada*) are poetic compositions identified according to the number of units that compose a poem as, for instance, *ekpade* (one-unit), *dupade* (two units), *tipade* (three units), *chaupade* (four units), *panchpade* (five), and *āṣṭpadi* (a type of long hymn in eight stanzas). Bhāi Baldeep Singh maintains that in the context of Gurbānī sangīt, *pada* constitutes a distinct compositional genre, which is at the foundation of the Gurbānī *dhur-pada* songs, or the “revealed” *pada* of the *Dhur*, the Creator (Cassio 2015).

In particular, it is the arrangement of the *pada* laid on a four-section structure (namely, *asthāi*, *antarā*, *sancārī* and *ābhog*) to be a distinct characteristic of this devotional song-form, which in Vaiṣṇava traditions is known as *Viṣṇu-pada* (composition in honor of Viṣṇu), or *dhruvad*. This latter term is also recurrent to indicate a genre of court music that scholars believe to derive from *dhruva-pada prabandha*, where the term “*dhruva*” (lit. fix) stands as a repeatable refrain (Sanyal and Widdess 2004).

The *dhruvads* transmitted to this day in the kīrtan literature of the Vaiṣṇava congregations have been preserved in two main traditions: the *samāja gāyan* and the *havelī sangīta*. *Samāja gāyan* is “congregational singing” of *padas* according to an antiphonal structure, in which the lead singer exposes a phrase, then repeated by the other singers in the group. With some differences in their literature, *samāja gāyan* is practiced among the *Nimbārka Sampradāya* (founded by the thirteenth-century philosopher Nimbārka), the *Rādhāvallabh Sampradāya* (founded by the sixteenth-century poet Hita Harivaṇśa), and the *Haridāsī Sampradāya* founded by poet-saint Swāmī Haridās (1480–1575). Notably – like the Gurbānī – these Vaiṣṇava traditions have their *padas* collected in anthologies organized according to rāgas. The *havelī sangīta* is prevalent, instead, among the Vallabha Sampradāya founded by Shrī Vallabhachariya Mahāprabhū (1479–1531), a contemporary of Gurū Nānak. The *havelī sangīta* preserved a four-fold *dhruvad* form that scholars deem to be the closest link between devotional temple music and the “classical” music of the courts (Thielemann 1997).

It is still debated, though, whether the temple *dhruvad* (and *dhur-pada*) is derived from the court tradition or vice versa. The majority of ethnomusicologists tend to interpret the use of *dhruvad* and rāgas in devotional music as adopted from the Great Tradition, meaning that the temple repertory was “borrowed” from art-form songs composed by specialized court musicians (Williams 2020; Miner 2015; Linden 2013).

With particular regard to the use of rāgas as the organizing principle of the devotional anthologies, in a comparative study of Sikh and Vaiṣṇava literature, Allyn Miner concludes that – due to the

technicalities of the rāga system – the creator of the melody must necessarily be a music specialist and, therefore “the bhakti composers or compilers were likely linked to courtly music-specialist circles” (Miner 2015: 397). On a similar note, in relation to the śabad kīrtan repertory, other scholars maintain that Sikh religious leaders employed (Muslim) court musicians to compose rāga-based dhrupads for ritual use (Sanyal and Widdess 2004). But the notion of the rāga composer as a music specialist seems to contrast with the foundation of pada as one *aesthetic unit* made of lyrics and music. Padas in fact are “not poems set to music, but they are created within a well-defined set-up (rāga), with a particular rhythmic pattern (tala) by a vāggeyakāra, a poet composer” (Delvoye 2013: 147). This concept of pada as one unit that binds together the lyrics with their sonic settings might explain the headings of the Sikh scriptural hymns, in which padas are always associated with rāgas. By separating the literary from the sounded Word, modern interpretations have relegated the musical dimension of the śabad to an aesthetic experience, a mere decoration of the written verse. This colonially derived view had also an impact on the vocabulary. An example is the incorporation of the English expression “classical music,” to designate rāga-based genres performed by court musicians, for an elitist audience.

While cross-pollination between the temple and court traditions has arguably happened at different times in mutual directions, the consequence of regarding rāgas as an exclusive feature of the so-called “classical” music, generated the misconception that any rāga-based kīrtan is necessarily in a “classical style” and, therefore, adopted from court music culture.

Singing the Sikh Scripture according to rāgas

“Kathā Kīrtan Rāg Nād Dhun Ehu Bāṇō Suāo”

[Kathā, Kīrtan, Rāg, Nād, Dhun, this has become the meaning of my life]

(GGS: 818)

Decolonial and postcolonial scholarship have long recognized the *oculocentric* bias of the Enlightenment rationality and colonial modernity. Only recently though, scholars are unearthing epistemologies based on the “ear” as cognitive apparatus and on *aurality* as a mode of knowing (Feld 2017; Hess 2015; Ochoa-Gautier 2014). The call to “listening” is consistent in the devotional literature of the pre-modern era, from Jaideva to Kabir, as well as reiterated by the Sikh gurūs. Unlike reading, listening is not the privilege of a few but is a transversal act, accessible to all regardless of social status, gender, or literacy. As described in the verse mentioned previously, “kathā, kīrtan, rāg, nād, dhun” are complementary components of the Sikh experience that entail listening, as a “mode of knowing” the Gurūs’ teaching. *Kathā* (exegesis), *kīrtan* (hymns’ singing), *nād* (‘struck’ audible sound), and *dhun* (folk tunes) are concepts that have a continuity to this day, whereas the knowledge and practice of rāga are the most neglected by contemporary performers and scholars, who disregard the rāga-based singing as an elitist, outdated norm. But what is a rāga? Do rāgas have a deeper dimension, a greater scope, than merely being the organizing principle of the scripture?

The word rāga designates a melodic framework governed by internal rules, like the specific functions and roles of notes, tuning, and characteristic movements. Derived from the Sanskrit root *ranj* (“to be colored, affected”), the term rāga remands to feeling, a defined sensorial experience, as an emotional response to a given melodic structure. According to Indian music theory, each rāga is associated with a specific emotional state, called *rasa*, which is “triggered by the musical clues implanted in the structure of a given melody” (Rowell 1992: 167).

One of the earliest definitions of rāga is found in Matanga Muni’s *Brhaddeśī* (lit. “The Great Deśī”), dated around the ninth century CE. In this treatise, Matanga classifies rāga as one of the seven song-forms (*gītī*) popular (*deśī*) during his time and describes it as “what colors the consciousness of all people” (Sarmadee 2003: 143).

Described in *shastras* (treatises) like the *Brhaddeśi*, rāgas are also known as *shastriya sangīt*, a term that Orientalist scholars have translated as “classical music.” However, Matanga’s reference helps to clarify that rāga is neither an exclusive experience, nor a unique feature of the “classical”/court art-music.

Notably, whereas the “court” traditions favored the musical elaboration of the rāgas over the text and evolved into *styles* (*bāhīs*) represented by families of musicians (*gharānās*), the “temple” traditions (like the Vaiśnava discussed earlier, and the Gurbānī) preserved the melodic element of the rāga as the framework for the singing of religious texts (*pada-pradhān*). Just by going through the list of the rāgas according to which the Sikh canonical text is structured, one can have an idea of the musical breadth of the Gurbānī kīrtan repertory, which includes rāgas not known in other traditions. Some of the rāgas in the GGS, present melodic variants that are distinguished in *chāyālag* (blend of two rāgas) and *sankīran* (a composition of more than two rāgas). Counting these variants as actual rāgas, in the final version of the GGS, the number of the rāgas is 61. (There are however disagreements among scholars about four rāgas, which in the following list are indicated in *italics*).

- 1 Sī Rāg
- 2 Mājh
- 3 Gauṛī, Gauṛī Dīpkī, Gauṛī Guārerī, Gauṛī Dakhṇī, Gauṛī Chaitī, Gauṛī Bairāgaṇ, Gauṛī Pūrbī
Dīpkī, Gauṛī Pūrbī, Gauṛī Mājh, Gauṛī Mālvā, Gauṛī Mālā, Gauṛī Sorathī
- 4 Āsā (*Āsā Kāfī*, *Āsāvarī Sudhaṅg*, *Āsāvarī*, *Āsā Āsāvarī*)
- 5 Gūjṛī
- 6 Devgandhārī, *Devchandhar*
- 7 Bihāgrā
- 8 Vaḍhaṅs (*Vaḍhaṅs Dakhṇī*)
- 9 Sorath
- 10 Dhanāsṛī
- 11 Jaitsṛī
- 12 Ṭoḍī
- 13 Bairāṛī
- 14 Tilāṅg (*Tilāṅg Kāfī*)
- 15 Sūhī (*Sūhī Kāfī*, *Sūhī Lalit*)
- 16 Bilāval (*Bilāval Dakhṇī*, *Bilāval Mahgaḥ*)
- 17 Goṇḍ (*Bilāval Goṇḍ*)
- 18 Rāmkalī (*Rāmkalī Dakhṇī*, *Rāmkalī Ānatā*)
- 19 Naṭ Nārāin (*Naṭ*)
- 20 Mālī Gauṛā
- 21 Mārū (*Mārū Kāfī*, *Mārū Dakhṇī*)
- 22 Tukhārī
- 23 Kedārā
- 24 Bhāīrao
- 25 Basant (*Basant Hīṇḍol*)
- 26 Sāraṅg
- 27 Mālār
- 28 Kāṇṛā
- 29 Kalyān (*Kalyān Bhopālī*)
- 30 Prabhātī (*Prabhātī Bibhās*, *Prabhātī Dakhṇī*, *Bibhās Prabhātī*)
- 31 Jaijāvantī (added by the tenth Gurū in the early eighteenth century)

Some of these rāgas show a continuity from the medieval culture to this day (like *Srī rāga*, *Bhārao*, *Kalyān*, *Bilāval*). Other rāgas are found uniquely in the Sikh scripture, such as *rāga Mājh*, *Vaḍhaṅs*, *Marū*, *Tukhārī*, and some forms of *Gaurī*. In the case of *rāga Jaijāvantī*, a rāga also known in modern traditions, the first written account is found in the GGS, and therefore its “creation” is attributed to the ninth Gurū Teg Bahadur (1621–1675). There are also rāgas that show a connection with specific regions of South Asia, which reflects the *pluriversality* of the Sikh literature. Such as the so-called *Dakhnī* forms (which indicate influence from Deccan, as the southern Indian subcontinent was known in ancient times), and the “*deśī*” (regional) rāgas (like *Āsā*, *Sūhī*, *Sorath*, *Prabhātī*), which are known and still practiced in some areas of Northwest India. The Gur-Sikh heritage has also preserved the memory of rāgas that predate the modern repertory but are no longer remembered in any contemporary traditions other than the *Gurbānī*. Such is the case of the *shudh* (“pure”) form of rāgas that we find only in their later *darbārī* (“court”) versions. For example, *rāga Kanṛā* and *rāga Malār*, transmitted in the *Gurbānī* sangit, are deemed the *shudh* (pure, original) form of the rāgas *Darbārī* *Kanṛā* and *Miyān kī* *Malhar* attributed to the legendary court musician *Miyān Tansen* (1500 c.a.–1589). In this class of rāgas – whose practice was discontinued in nineteenth and twentieth century Hindustani classical music – we also find *rāga Gond*, which contemporary ethnomusicologists claim to be a “lost” rāga. (Schofield 2019).

It is still unclear the logic of the rāgas’ sequence in the Sikh canonical text compiled by Gurū Arjan, but scholars believe that *śabads* are grouped according to a melodic-thematic principle. This suggests an underlying link between the meaning of the verses, the emotional state (*rasa*) that the rāga conveys, and also the specific poetical-musical form in which the content is delivered.

Forms of Sung Poetry in the GGS

The majority of the scriptural hymns in the GGS are poetic compositions (*padās* or *pade*) with rhyming stanzas whose number of lines varies from very short to longer. Comparing the Sikh musical literature with other rāga-based *pada* repertories, “other dhrupadī traditions have not shown any variety of *padās* which the gurūs have very carefully logged in *Gurbānī*” (Singh B. 2019b). Another distinct feature of these hymns is the presence of a refrain called *rahāo* (lit. “pause”), which works musically as a *ritornello*, and “whose significance is emphasized by its often being composed in a somewhat different meter from the body of the hymn” (Shackle and Mandair 2005, p. xxiv). Sikh scripture also contains other poetical genres such as the *salok*, consisting of a pair of rhyming lines, meant more as an aphorism to be remembered than a composition to be sung. *Saloks* from the first four Gurūs have also been inserted by Gurū Arjan to link the stanzas of the *vāran* (singular *vār*), the ballads based on folk sung poetry that the Sikh Gurūs adapted to convey their teachings. In the GGS there are 22 *vāran*, authored by the first five Gurūs except for one *vār* (in rāga *Ramkalī*) attributed to the Muslim musicians (*rabābīs*) *Sattā* and *Balwand*. *Vāran* are long compositions, structured in 20 or more stanzas called *paurī*-s, or “step,” in which the *saloks* function as a *narrative recitative* in the performance of heroic ballads. *Vāran* are set to rāgas and therefore included in the related musical chapters. To Gurū Nānak are attributed three *vāran* (in rāga *Mājh*, *Āsā*, and *Malār*); to Gurū Amar Dās, four ballads (in rāga *Gujrī*, *Sūhī*, *Ramkalī*, *Marū*); and to Gurū Rām Dās, eight *vāran* (in *Srī rāga*, *Gaurī*, *Bihāgrā*, *Vaḍhaṅs*, *Sorath*, *Bilāval*, *Sārang*, and *Kanṛā*); and Gurū Arjan composed six *vāran* (in rāga *Gaurī*, *Gujrī*, *Jaitsrī*, *Ramkalī*, *Marū*, and *Basant*). Additionally, nine of these *vāran* also present the indication of a specific *dhunī* (tune) in which the ballad was supposed to be sung. As an example, the heading of the *vār* in rāga *Mājh* (GGS: 187) attributed to Gurū Nānak, reads that this ballad was to be sung to the same tune (*dhunī*) of the ballad narrating the story of *Malik Murīd* and *Chandrahā Sohā*. It is unfortunate that while the melodic framework

of the rāgas has been preserved in other songs, the aural memory of these original *dhunīs* seems to be completely lost.

Notably, whereas the headings of the poems are detailed, there are no specific indications about the melodic setting of the compositions, which were only passed on orally until the introduction of music notation at the beginning of the twentieth century. Alongside the *vāran* are other regional song-forms set to unique melodic frameworks that have been transmitted to this day. Some of these are performed only on specific occasions. Among these are the *ghoṛiān* in rāga *Vaḍhaṅs* and the *lāvān* in rāga *Sūhī*, both composed by Gurū Rām Dās for the *Ānand Kārāj* (*dī kīrtan*), the wedding ceremony, also formalized by the fourth Gurū. Although there are *śabads* in rāgas suitable for death ceremonies (*Śīr*, *Mārū*, *Mārū Kāfi*, *Vaḍhaṅs*, *Soraṭh*, *Tilāṅg*, *Tilāṅg Kāfi*, *Jaijāvanṭī*), since the time of Gurū Nānak, *alāhunīān* were known as the mourning songs for the *Akāl dī kīrtan*. Almost forgotten by kīrtaniyās of the modern era, *alāhunīān* is composed of a set of five chants by Gurū Nānak in rāga *Vaḍhaṅs* (GGS, 578), except the third, which is in *Vaḍhaṅs Dakhṇī* (Singh B. 2019).

Among the song-forms preserved in the Sikh Scripture, *partāl* has a unique place, with a structure that combines diverse rhythmic cycles within one composition. In the GGS there are only 55 *śabads*, in 13 different rāgas, that carry the *partāl* designation. These compositions are attributed to the fourth and fifth Sikh Gurūs, which not only is a significant marker in the history of Gurbānī kīrtan but also suggests that this song-form may be an original contribution of Gurū Rām Dās and Gurū Arjan's.

In some cases, additional indications appear in the headings of the hymns, right after the name of the genre (like: Rāg *Vaḍhaṅs* M 1 Ghar 5 *Alāhunīā*), but their meaning is still debated. For instance, one of the most obscure words is the term *ghar*, as given in the example previously. Scholars and practitioners have formulated contrasting interpretations when the term – that literally means “house” – is applied to the field of sung poetry. Bhāi Kāhn Singh Nābhā maintained that *ghar* has a twofold meaning. One is *tāl* (rhythmic) and the other is *svār* (note), a term that indicates “various types of singing of a rāg” (2008 [1930]: 1120). In the GGS, *ghars* are numbered from 1 to 17, which according to Nābhā's interpretation “gives an indication to the singer that a particular hymn has to be sung according to a specific *ghar* of a rāg” (Ibid.). Nābhā seems to favor the idea of *ghar* as a melodic elaboration (*svārprastar*) of the rāga. To this day, though, scholars and practitioners are still divided between those who interpret the *ghar*'s heading as designating a type of rhythmic cycle (Singh G. 2011; Singh 2008) and others who view *ghar* as a term indicating styles of singing (Singh B. 2011; Kaur 2011). There is however neither written nor oral evidence that support either interpretation because the memory and practice of *ghar* has not been carried into the modern era.

Singing in (Conventional) Time

According to Indian music theory, each rāga carries extramusical associations with codified emotional states or *rasas*. In the Sikh scripture, the presence of rāgas that evoke devotion, and equipoise (*sahaj*), leads scholars to believe that “the Gurūs laid great emphasis on the performance of those rāgas that produced a balanced effect on the minds of both listeners and performers” (Singh P. 2019). Each rāga, with its distinct “color” and feeling, is traditionally associated with an appropriate time of the day (and night) or with a season. This conventional bond between rāga, rasa, and time of singing seems to apply also the Sikh scriptural hymns, in relation to the meaning of the *śabad*. For instance, in hymns mentioning the blooming of nature is noted a meaningful mutualism between the description of the spring and the musical setting to rāga *Basant*, a spring rāga. Similarly, *śabads* that refer to the monsoon are often set to rāgas, like *Malār*, associated with that season. However, in the context of devotional poetry, time and seasons are also a metaphor for conveying *gyān* (insight)

and inspiring *dhyān* (state of contemplation). Therefore, the imagery of spring can also refer to an inner state of awakening, and the rainy season to the showering of the Gurū's blessing.

In the past, the norm to perform a *rāga* according to a predefined time/season was arguably stricter than today's practice. To be able to sing a certain *śabad* at a different time than the one conventionally associated with the *rāga* indicated in the scripture, it came into practice to change the melodic setting into that of a *rāga* suitable for the specific moment of the performance. In congregational singing and in modern arrangements, the *rāga*-time association is disregarded. It is, instead, particularly relevant in the formal *kīrtan* sessions called *chaunkīs* (sittings) that were institutionalized by the fifth Gurū at the Sṛī Harmandir Sāhib, in Amritsar, the main shrine also commonly known as the Golden Temple (Figure 2). These developed from the *chār chaukiān*, "the four sessions" that Bhāī Kāhn Singh Nābhā (1930) describes as (1) *Āsā dī Vār* in the early morning; (2) the *Charan Kamal*, in *rāg* Bilāval in the morning; (3) *So Dar* and *Rahrās* at sunset; and (4) *Kalyān* after sunset. These four *chaunkīs* originated from the morning and evening liturgical practices introduced by Gurū Nānak, and established by his successor, Gurū Angad. As mentioned by Bhāī Gurdās (Vār 1, Pauṛī 38), these are the recitation of the Japī in the time of the dawn (*amrit vēlē*) and the singing of *So Dar* and *Artī* in the evening. According to some scholars (Singh P. 2011; Singh 2014), the *kīrtan chaunkīs* that the fifth Gurū established in the seventeenth century at the Golden Temple were eight, and they were modeled on the eight liturgical sessions (*asthyama*) practiced in the Vaiṣṇava temples, as follows:

- 1 Āsā dī Vār dī chaunkī (early morning)
- 2 Bilāval dī chaunkī (after sunrise)
- 3 Ānand dī chaunkī (before noon)
- 4 Sāraṅg dī chaunkī (noon)
- 5 Charan kamal dī chaunkī (after noon)
- 6 So Dar dī chaunkī (sunset)
- 7 Artī/Kalyān dī chaunkī (night)
- 8 Kīrtan sohilā dī chaunkī (late night)

Out of these eight *chaunkīs*, five are considered "permanent sessions," and at the end of each, the *ardās* (prayer) is recited followed by the distribution of the *karah prasād* to the attendees. Along with these eight timeslots, seasonal *rāgas* (and their variants) like *Basant* in the spring, and *Malār* during the monsoon months, can be sung at any time of the day. In the early twentieth century, the number of *chaunkīs* performed at the Sṛī Harmandir Sāhib extended up to 15 a day, during which the continuous singing of the *bāṇī* symbolizes the omnipresence of the Akāl Purakh (Singh P. 2011). Despite the increased number of institutionalized *kīrtan* sittings, after Partition the repertory of the *chaunkīs* went through significant changes, and the performance of the *śabads* according to the appropriate *rāga* prescribed for each session became feebler.

Kīrtan Types

Kīrtan sessions at the Sṛī Harmandir Sāhib, and at main gurdwārās, are rendered by specialized "temple musicians," in "solo" performances that until pre-Partition era were organized following a standard sequence of pieces. The sitting began with the accompanists playing a *śān*, an instrumental introduction in which the percussion played accompanied by a string instrument. After the *śān*, the lead *kīrtaniyā* unfolded the *rāga* by singing on a free rhythm a *mangalacharan* on auspicious ("mangal") verses from the GGS. After the *mangalacharan*, either a *partāl* or a *dhrupad* in *vaḍḍe tālas* (long slow-paced rhythmic cycles) was sung. The progression ended with *dharnās*, tunes based on popular

melodic-poetic lines in which the congregation joined the temple musicians, singing along with them. Dharnā is particularly apt for mass singing, with the stanzas rendered by the lead kīrtaniyā and the “refrain” (the *rahāo*) sung by the sangat (Paintal 1978). While *śān*, *mangalacharan* and *vaḍḍe tālas* compositions are no longer remembered, according to Bhāi Baldeep Singh, the practice of dharnā continued, generating a new standard of kīrtan based on this *responsorial* form of singing.

Another type of kīrtan is the *joṭian*, a congregational practice that is said to trace back to Bābā Buddhā (1506–1631). From the root *joṭ* (lit. “pair, couple”) this is a group performance based on an *antiphonal* structure, with one line sung by one group and repeated by a second party (Nabhā 1930). *Joṭian dī kīrtan* is also practiced during processions like the *parbhāt pheri* (early morning circumambulations) and the *nagar kīrtans* (town processions held on special occasions). In the mid-twentieth century a new congregational form, based on the *joṭian dī kīrtan*, was popularized by the reformer and spiritual leader by Bhāi Randhir Singh (1878–1961). He gave the start to the *akhand* (lit. “unbroken”) kīrtan practice, based on long uninterrupted singing sessions, often lasting all night (the so-called *rainsabāi*). In the *akhand kīrtan*, verses of the GGS are sung according to a simple, monotonous, melodic structure generally on a binary rhythm accompanied by a *tablā* player and marked by idiophones (*chintā*) played by the sangat. *Samāgams* (gatherings) organized by the Akhand Kīrtanī Jathā (AKJ) have gained a popular appeal in India and abroad, for the intense chanting practice that seems to induce a trans-like state in the participants.

The Transmission of the Musical Knowledge

With the completion of the Sṛī Harmandir Sāhib, the compilation of the scripture indexed by rāgas, and the institution of the *chaunkīs*, came the formalized institution of “temple musicians,” namely, the *rabābīs* and *rāgīs*, who were specialized in the service and the rāga-based rendition of the hymns. Notably, the first ones belonged to a rank of Muslim musicians that traced back to Bhāi Mardānā, the *rabāb* player who accompanied Gurū Nānak’s in his singing and *udasis* (journeys). The *rāgīs* (rāga experts) was a new class of kīrtan singers hailing from the Sikh *Panth*.

Both *rabābīs* and *rāgīs* acquired the status of specialized “temple servants” and played a role in preserving the *puratan śabad nīts*, the heritage musical compositions from the time of the Sikh gurūs. Even if the memory of illustrious kīrtaniyās has been transmitted in oral accounts, and more recently in written sources, *rabābīs* and *rāgīs* never constituted proper *gharanās* – or formalized musical styles associated with a particular lineage – as in the *darbārī* court music (Neuman 1980). Gurbānī kīrtan’s repertory is a *panthic* heritage belonging to the community and is not restrained to any particular person or family lineage. Bhāi Gurcharan Singh (1915–2017) and Bhāi Avtar Singh (1925–2006), sons of the legendary kīrtaniya Bhāi Jwala Singh, affirmed that there existed only one “school” of kīrtaniyās, which is Gurū Nānak’s *dharamsāl*, founded in 1521 when the first Gurū established the earliest Sikh community at Kartarpur. According to Bhāi Baldeep Singh, per instruction of the tenth and last Gurū, Gurū Gobind Singh, in 1709, Bhāi Dharam Singh instituted two centers of education: the *Girvaṛī* and *Sekhwāh taksāls*. The lineage of learning of these two schools has been lost, but the term *taksāl* (lit. *mint, imprint*) was reintroduced in the late twentieth century to designate musical styles developed after Partition time. Gurnam Singh (2009) identified at least 26 *taksāls* that he named after places of worship or venues associated with renowned kīrtaniyās of the past and of the present. There is no historical evidence, however, to support this information, and the acknowledgement of distinguished *taksāls* seems to be modeled on the notion of *gharanā*, in order to align the Gur-Sikh tradition to the national paradigm and make sense of new styles that emerged after Partition time. Bhāi Baldeep Singh maintains that only a few streams of Guru Nānak’s *dharamsāl* survived to pre-Partition time and – albeit individual styles – the knowledge of the repertory was

consistent throughout the old-generation kīrtaniyās. Differences in the renditions of the traditional repertory, as well as the creation of newly composed śābads based on modern Hindustani music, is a process that began in the late nineteenth century with the rise of Sikh reformist movements and escalated in the post-Independence era. At the dawn of independence from the British rule, identity politics – which fueled the notion of “purity” across the Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh intelligentsia – also had a strong influence on the canonization of music traditions, resulting in a “sanitation” of those elements deemed spurious. Since the 1890s, there has been a thrust in promoting Sikh-led musicological scholarship and education, which has progressively disempowered the (Muslim) rabābīs from their role as custodians and performers of the centuries-old kīrtan compositions, until they were officially banned from doing kīrtan at the gurdwārās in 1925. These internal reforms translated into the creation of schools (*vidyālayās*) for baptized Sikhs, attached to the gurdwārās and managed by a central Sikh governance. This was the time the first books with notations of the śābads appeared and with them a reformed vocabulary with the introduction of new expressions, such as *Gurmat sangīt* (lit. “the music of the Gurū’s wisdom”). *Gurmat sangīt* designates in fact a new chapter of the modern history of kīrtan, in which new repertory was introduced, while the rabābīs’ tradition disappeared. The contribution of the rabābīs was revalued only in the late twentieth century, through extensive documentation on the last living exponents. Among these, Bhāi Ghulam Mohammed Chand enjoyed a late fame, and his death in 2015 signaled the end of a tradition that had begun with Bhāi Mardānā. Notably, a comprehensive collection of the rabābīs’ repertory was gathered by the *Namdhari*’s sect, whose spiritual leaders were not only appreciative of the *purātan* repertory and skilled kīrtaniyās but promoted the practice of the scriptural hymns with the accompaniment of traditional string and percussion instruments.

The Tangible Heritage: Instruments

The musical instruments represent the tangible, material counterpart of the Sikh cultural heritage that, like the orally transmitted knowledge, is in danger of disappearing. There have been attempts, since the 1990s, to reconstruct the shape of musical instruments that have not been in use since the pre-Partition era. The paucity of written and oral information about these instruments generates, however, strong disagreements among scholars:

There are four main instruments (*tanti sāz*) associated with the Sikh gurūs, and among these, the first one to appear since early Sikh history is the *rabāb*. There are no accounts of Gurū Nānak playing this instrument, but in iconographic and oral sources the *rabāb* is always associated with Bhāi Mardānā, the lifelong friend and accompanist of the Sikh faith’s founder. An instrument carrying the same name is known from the Middle East to Central Asia, but the *rabāb* used in the Sikh culture has unique features which distinguished it. Gurnam Singh introduced the term *Firandīya rabāb* to indicate that Bhāi Firandā supposedly presented this instrument to Bhāi Mardānā. Whereas according to Bhāi Baldeep Singh (the first Sikh scholar who has revived the instrument), Bhāi Mardānā played a *dhrupadī rabāb*, which was “used from Punjab to Bengal for different styles of kīrtan in various languages and religious traditions” (Singh 2004). This *rabāb* is a plucked chordophone, a fretless lute with a long neck and six gut or silk strings, attached to a round-shaped resonator, covered by goat skin. Another string instrument that was known for the accompaniment of Gurbānī kīrtan is the *sarandā*. Historically associated with the third Gurū, Amar Dās, this is a three-string fiddle with an hourglass-shaped resonator, covered with a skin. To Gurū Arjan, the fifth Gurū, is attributed the creation of the *joṛī-pakhāwaj*, a pair of drums derived from the medieval *mṛdangam*, with its distinct playing technique, and a repertory of rhythmic compositions unique to the *Amritsarī bāj* (Singh B. 2019). The *rabāb* (Figure 3), the *sarandā* (Figure 4), and the *joṛī-pakhāwaj* (Figure 5), although

reshaped under the instructions of the Sikh Gurūs, can be considered variants of instruments already existing in other traditions, whereas the *tāūs* (Figure 6) is an original contribution of the sixth Sikh Gurū, Hargobind (1595–1644) and has remained unique to Sikh culture. This instrument – with the voice and shape of a peacock (*tāūs* in Urdu) – is a fretted instrument with four (or five) melodic strings and 15 sympathetic strings, played with a bow. Like the *rabāb* and the *sarandā*, the *tāus* was used to accompany the *kīrtan* singers, providing a continuous drone. Having almost disappeared by the beginning of the twentieth century, these instruments have been replaced by the harmonium and the *tablā*, for melodic and rhythmic accompaniment respectively. Also available in electronic versions, the *harmonium* and *tablā* became a staple of the twenty-first century *śabad kīrtan*.

Sikh Musicology

The Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 dramatically affected the life of the Sikh communities across South Asia, with the dispersion of peoples and their intangible heritage. In the post-Partition era, the assimilative force of national policies, which concurred to fabricate a pan-Indian identity, entailed in turn an *epistemicide* of traditional knowledges. In music, this occurred through the institution of a centralized system of education that has established a singular narrative of Indian music history and reshaped centuries-old traditions, according to twentieth-century stereotypes of “classical,” devotional, and folk music. In this new context, film and pop music, particularly, became the cohesive tool that bonded people into one nation beyond their language, religious, and cultural barriers (Morcom 2015; Sarrazin 2008). By the 1960s, the aesthetic canons of Bollywood music and Indian “cassette culture” (Manuel 1993) were adopted also in the composition of new *kīrtan* songs. As the renowned *kīrtaniyā* Bhāi Gurcharan Singh recalled (2008), old-generation *rāgis*, disempowered in their role of custodians of *purātan śabad rīts*, were forced by the management of the *gurdwārās* to simplify their repertory to make it more appealing to the *sangat*. In response to the decline of the traditional forms of *kīrtan*, a renewed interest in the performance of *rāga*-based *śabads* sparked in Punjab around the end of the 1980s. This revival, however, took divergent approaches. On the one hand, it brought the creation of newly-composed (or *neo-traditional*) *rāga*-based songs, inspired by the twentieth-century *khyāl* (Hindustani “classical” music). This approach is supported by the misconception that any *śabad* set to a *rāga* is necessarily derived from a “classical” art-form. On the other hand, the so-called *Sikh Renaissance* is fostering the recovery of the existing body of *rāga*-based heritage compositions (the actual *purātan śabad rīts*) and their pedagogy which have survived in oral and written forms.

An underestimated issue is the generational void between the *kīrtaniyās* (*rāgis* and *rabābīs*) active before the Partition and those who – growing up after 1947 – were trained in “schools” according to the modern Hindustani system, which, paradoxically, became the paradigm for newly composed repertories of *śabad kīrtan*.

One of the earliest initiatives to “revive” the performance of *rāga*-based *kīrtan* was taken in 1991 by a religious figure, Sant Baba Suchā Singh of Jawaddī (Ludhiana). With a desire to determine the “definite shape” of the 31 *rāgas* and their variants indicated in the GGS, Suchā Singh gathered a *Rāg Nirnayak Committee*, composed of renowned musicians, *kīrtaniyās*, and scholars who had the task to discuss and “finalize” the melodic outlines of the *rāgas*, with particular reference to those deemed as “forgotten.” This committee introduced (and in some cases created) normative standards of the *rāga* forms, which to this day work as guidelines for the composition of “neo” *kīrtan* repertory. An offspring of the Jawaddī conference is the first Gurmat Sangīt Chair established in 2003 at the Punjabi University of Patiala for “the promotion, propagation and preservation of Gurmat Sangeet as a school of music” (PUP). Funded with the financial support of a private institution (the Sri

Gurū Giān Parkash Foundation), since 2005 the Chair also runs a teaching Department of Gurmat Sangīt, which has introduced Sikh musicology as a new discipline in the university system. Until 2019, the Chair was under the leadership of Gurnam Singh, a student of Prof. Tārā Singh, who was a renowned scholar of the post-Partition era. Tārā Singh has been a prolific writer and composer of neo traditional śabads who, like his disciples, envisioned the teaching of Gurmat Sangīt in a state-led institution, reserved until then only for the dissemination of Hindustani classical music. Unlike the Gurmat Sangīt vidyālayās, in which students are only young men destined to a career as rāgīs and kīrtan accompanists, the courses at PUP are open to both girls and boys aiming to earn a university degree in Gurmat Sangīt, taught according to the pedagogy and the styles of performance adopted from the modern national system of music. On this note, a critique is voiced by Bhāi Baldeep Singh, who pinpointed the distinction between this *neo-colonial* Gurmat Sangīt school (which emerged in the twentieth century), and the *uncolonized paramparā* (tradition), indicating with this expression the tradition that has preserved the memory of Gurbānī sangīt as an entire ecosystem of knowledges predating the impact of colonial modernity. Based on ethnographic fieldwork within and outside the Gurbānī traditions, since the late 1980s, Bhāi Baldeep Singh's pivotal work focuses on the reconstitution of the tangible and intangible assets of the Gurbānī sangīt, through a comprehensive approach to musical knowledges ranging from organology to musicology. Bhāi Baldeep Singh – who coined the expression "*Sikh Renaissance*" to indicate the resurgence of this *ecology of knowledges* – belongs to a renowned family of kīrtaniyās tracing back to the time of the third Gurū. His great granduncles, the two brothers Bhāi Avtar Singh and Bhāi Gurcharan Singh, in the late 1960s, were recognized as the only kīrtaniyās who had preserved the original compositions from the times of the Sikh Gurūs.

Albeit the different orientations that distinguish the exponents of the *uncolonized* Gurbānī sangīt from the *neo-colonial* Gurmat sangīt's revivalists, their works generated a new wave of interest in the repertoires and the history of śabad kīrtan among Sikh communities and Western scholars. Information and archival recordings now circulate on web platforms and social media, although not supported by a critical assessment of these materials. To advance research and take the discussion onto international academic ground, only recently Sikh musicology was introduced in the Western hemisphere, as a new discipline that studies Sikh musical practices from an ethnomusicological lens. Established at Hofstra University (New York), the Sardarni Harbans Kaur Chair in Sikh musicology is the first of its kind in Western academia. Active since 2011, this Chair is an endowment of Dr. Hakam Singh (1928–2020), a renowned member of the Sikh community in the USA, a scholar, and a kīrtaniyā himself. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the Sardarni Harbans Kaur Chair, currently held by the author, engages ethnomusicological research with Sikh studies scholarship, contributing in this way to reestablishing the legitimate place of Sikh heritage in the history of South Asian music, while introducing the study of the music literature as a component of Sikh studies.

New modes of aurality keep the tradition of singing the scriptural hymns thriving. It is, at the same time, necessary to recognize and preserve the repertoires that carry the memory and the sound of Sikh culture into the future. To this end, Sikh Musicology serves as an academic avenue to foster a critical appreciation of the "Sikh world" through its tangible and intangible heritage.

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